

The Red Circle

A CULTURE SHOCK Short Story



Written by BRAVADO

Illustrated by AllShaftsFall

"We see, therefore, that War is not merely a political act, but also a real political instrument, a continuation of political commerce, a carrying out of the same by other means."

— Carl von Clausewitz, *On War*

"You got an appointment?" The doorman stared down a wide nose, nostrils flaring.

"Shit, I mean, I guess."

"It's a simple question. Yes or no."

"I ain't talked to no secretary, if that's what yours' askin'," he deflected, with casual contempt.

"Yeah, I'll bet. You know this guy, Sorse?"

A second bouncer glanced up from sizing the man before him, flicking a red snapback around his cranium. "Nah."

The first turned back to face the interloper. "Then get your walk on."

This the wrong place? He squinted off to his left, scarcely scrying a faded street sign. *Yeah, Oldtown Road, alright. Maybe I...?* Danny turned, begrudgingly, preparing to extricate himself to the nearest corner, when a fourth voice seized him.

"X? Just one?"

"Uh, yeah, one guy."

"Kinda old, balding?" jeered Sorse.

"Let him through. I'm expecting him."

"So you got an appointment after all?" The goon glared, and resentfully cleared the doorway, swapping his pupils to the dimly-lit corner intersection in the distance.

Danny adjusted the collar of a stained hoodie, making a show of brushing nearly-nonexistent dust off of his shoulders, then, with a parting scowl thrown to the side, ducked into the doorway.

He found himself in a small, modular office, complete with filing cabinets, rolling chairs, and artificial plants. An array of plexiglass panes comprised much of the rear wall, though obscured by an externally-applied layer of wallpaper depicting a familiar city skyline. As

juxtaposed with the decrepit and imposing exterior of the warehouse, it felt quaint and unexpectedly welcoming, if not a little alien to Danny's ilk.

And it was, despite its apparently haphazard construction, uncharacteristically *clean*.

A sizable figure of a man sat behind a desk, scalp radiating carefully-molded horns of visibly-gelled argent hair, shoulders wreathed in a patchwork garment most aptly described as barely passing the dress code of the Constitutional Convention. *I swear, it's a fuckin' requirement for the bosses to look stupid, ain't it? Least this guy's got some style.* Upon detecting his new company, he snapped to attention, heels clicking against the vinyl floor, and gestured enthusiastically for the entrant to join him.

"My most sincere apologies for the reception: surely, you understand the business we're in, the places we find ourselves..." he trailed off. "Mr. Strad, I presume?" Danny found his hand embraced in the man's palm, gyrating with laud.

"Uh, yea-"

"Please, please, sir, have a seat. Would you like a drink?" He waved towards a tall refrigerator at his back, visibly stocked with an uncountable assortment through an immaculately-shined glass door.

Danny spotted his favorite — a Swimming Pools® 40 oz malt liquor — and requested it without identifying the rest. *Damn, he's got the glass bottles. Fuckin' VIP treatment.* He popped the top off with a twist and took a swig, then a seat, allowing the cap to clatter on the otherwise unblemished vinyl floor. If the man behind the desk took notice, he betrayed no reaction beyond the cordiality maintained thus far.

"Now, I seem to recall your face — maybe you just have a familiar nose — but I think I've seen you around. Busy lately?"

"Of a sorts." He took another swig. "The kind'a busy that happens here."

"Of course, of course. Are you enjoying your time with us thus far?"

"You kiddin'? Most money I've made in my life. Even accountin' for inflation and shit."

The executive grinned wider at the suggestion. "Desperate times, desperate measures, eh? Well, I'm glad to hear you're doing well for yourself. We make a lot of promises around here — keep people dreaming, y'know — but sometimes you can't help but wonder if any of it's true."

The administrator settled back in his chair, shifting a stack of paper in front of him.

"Now, how long have you been with us, sir?"

"Shit, how long we been around?"

The man raised an eyebrow, flicked a sheet of paper over, and peered into it. "I see. Original member, is it? He picks them well." He shuffled forth a paper from the middle of a stack, and frowned with inquisition. "Name change?"

"Yeah."

"Good. A proper brand ambassador, you are!" the man congratulated, without a hint of irony.

Danny cleared his throat expectantly, and found it uncomfortably dry. *We goin' anywhere with this?*

The man seemed to answer the unaired question. "Well, I have all of this here," he slapped the stack of paper with enthusiasm, "and be sure — I've read it. I'm impressed, even. But it rarely tells the whole story, does it?"

"Wouldn't want it to. That'd be a testimony." Another sip.

"Right you are, sir!" The colonial coat's buttons jostled with a chuckle. "In the interest of preserving your oh-so-valuable time, I'd like to ask just a handful of questions before seeing you off. Starting with this...*testimony* from one of our own. A certain...*Skandalouz*. Word here is you were of in-dis-pensable aid to him recently."

This guy smiles too much. "Sure, I guess. Flipped a couple'a bricks for him."

"Alone?"

"Yeah. I mean, mostly. Spread some eight-balls out to a buncha guys I know, not sure where they end up. Probably in their nose. Or their girl's."

"Clean record, too. Well, while you've been here." He quickly corrected himself. "That's something to be proud of. Seems you're out there more often than not; how'd you manage that?"

"The cops? Easy to spot. Harder for 'em to spot me — I don't keep a regular schedule. I've got the usual suspects — I go to 'em. They're predictable. I'm not. If they start buyin' more outta nowhere, or no-show a couple'a times, I cut 'em off. Then, I watch 'em for a while. Give 'em a chance to slip up. There's typical tweaker shit, and there's narc shit. If it ain't the latter, I'll let 'em come back. Their money's still good, as long as they're alone."

He listened with ostensible care, toying with the keratinous spike closest to his left ear.

"And these buyers — they're not all direct customers?"

"Users? Some. Others pick up a bit more for a turnaround. 'Course they keep some for themselves — they ain't hidin' it."

"You have your own distribution network?" the man observed, with restrained surprise.

"I guess you could put it like that. You got a problem with that?"

"Of course not, my friend. We encourage it, even — but very few take the call to arms as well as you do. Perhaps they have something to learn from you. Why, I've half a mind to give you product with tracers, just to get some metrics on your model. But, of course, we don't do that here." He smirked with a fiendish undertone, as though to suggest the antipode. Danny suddenly felt vulnerable, as though he'd been made to share something he hadn't meant to. *A confession. But to what?* A familiar thirst awakened. He raised the bottle to his lips.

"Are you on good terms with all of your...coworkers?" the officer chose his words carefully. "Say, this Skandalouz, for example. Find him agreeable?"

"I mean, I ain't gonna say I like the guy. Whole time you're around him, just feels like he's waitin' for ya to turn around, y'know? But he moves weight like a fuckin' champion belt." Strad shrugged. "If he's got somethin' for me, I ain't gonna complain. As long as I don't gotta look 'im in the eye."

The head honcho nodded in recognition, as though in agreement. "Yes, I'm told he has... *cultivated a brand* of his own. Retains his own staff, as well, correct?"

"Uh, yeah, buncha guys kinda like me. Almost as good. And that muscle with the tall hair. Never seen him without 'im. Might even follow him into the bathroom, for all I know. And the bird, I guess. Doubt that thing's on payroll, though." Danny cracked his knuckles in an expression of ennui. *Strangest interrogation I've ever been in. Didn't he say he's read all of this already?*

"Ah, yes, well it is getting rather late, isn't it? And, accordingly, this office is no place for a man of your talents. I simply wished to put a face to the name — get us on speaking terms, as it were." The creased longcoat unfolded as he pulled himself up from his chair. Danny found himself naturally mirroring the motion.

"Another for the road?" He gestured at the near-empty beverage.

"Eh, sure, why not," he accepted, dumping off the remains mouthward and dropping the vessel on the desk.

The taskmaster grabbed another bottle from the display and, after a fumbling obscured by his broad silhouette, produced an approximately bottle-shaped paper bag. Danny reached out to grab it, anticipating the satisfying resistance of glass, but his hand found a misshapen, folded lump of paper instead. His adversary did not loosen his grip, but instead leaned in and opened rapport again in muted tones.

"I'd like your help with something. Regarding our mutual friend."

Strad modulated to the lowered volume. "There a problem?"

"No. Not yet. But I expect to be the first to know if — when — there is. I take it you understand?"

Danny fondled the voluminous wad within, eyes full of avarice. "Ah. Uh, yeah, all capeesh here, boss."

The boss released his grip and nodded in acknowledgement. He raised his voice to a low shout, "Anyone outside?"

"Nah." A familiar voice.

"Very well. Coming out." Mister Castle led Danny Strad to the door from which he had emerged a quarter-hour before. "We'll have a made man of you, yet!" He clapped him on the shoulder and gently, yet decisively, shoved Danny through the doorframe - reuniting him with the familiar musty scent and distant lights of Midnight City.



*
**

The door slammed to a shut; muffled crude jeering gave way to distant automotive ambience.

A toothy smile dropped into a weary grin, and then into an exhausted grimace. *Last one for the day.* Castle sighed to himself. There had been more of them than ever recently. *My fault,* he figured. Rapid recruitment had been his idea, and he had thus far failed to scale appropriately — to delegate these more mundane tasks away to an underling. *It's a matter of trust. There's a right way and a wrong way. I know I can do this right. What of someone else?*

Besides, it was, at times like these, a welcome reprieve. The interviews were the easy part. People like talking about themselves — to show you the parts of them they want seen. Sometimes they don't know it, so you have to know what they're proud of beforehand, or what they *should* be proud of — so that you may demand it of them when they're in front of you. It was tempting to grab them by the shoulders and shake them, shouting '*Look at this! Look at you! Look at everything you've done!*' But the power laid in the subtlety. It didn't matter that you already knew. It made them feel important. Like they *mattered*. It was important to make them feel like they mattered.

Even if they didn't.

He sauntered over to his desk, stopping to pluck an aluminum screw-top from the floor, reunited it with its vitric companion, and dropped it into a receptacle next to the chair he found himself sinking into again. *This one will matter*. The previous task was not one he could leave to an underling. It required a sort of judgment he could only trust himself to do. The ability to end the operation before it began in earnest. *Deceptively easy*, he thought. *The man had practically agreed to it before he knew he was being enlisted.*

He returned to the routine task set before him by the only man he was happy to take orders from — himself. *And soon*, he hoped, *the only authority he'd have to answer to.*

Tonight's agenda: clandestine finance. The gang had enough cashflow to be noticed by the New York Stock Exchange — if it were noticed at all — and proportional need to deploy it. That being said, whilst a contraband trafficker wouldn't turn their nose up at a slightly-bloodied band of Benjamins, the more formal markets were a bit more discerning. This was the problem that demanded a solution. Fortunately, it was a solution older than anyone Castle had ever known to use it.

They could hardly walk up to a prospective proprietor, hand them a briefcase of loose bills, and say 'make the deed out to Double Helix, LLC, please-and-thanks.' You needed banks and brokers; credit-checks and tax-audits; middlemen and paper-pushers who had little interest in flaunting the law so flagrantly. However, if a restaurant sells, perhaps, \$1500 a night, who's to say they didn't collect an additional \$300 in gratuity fees and tips? And, sure, most of their customers ran credit or debit, but there was room for a few more cash customers during business hours. The IRS would get their cut, then, and no one would raise objection — certainly not the employees, who were paid a premium over market rates. And if that restaurant, upon

experiencing a sudden inexplicable streak of success, decides to expand to a new location, who'd hesitate to sell them a place at an otherwise vacant strip mall, or a slick new delivery van to match? This was the *modus operandi*, and — for the moment — it was working.

He skimmed a list of these facades before him, each assigned an optimal market niche and with corresponding ledgers distributed within the pile:

ADULT ENTERTAINMENT:

Members Only
Mississippi Queen
Air on a G String
Petite Suite
Dark Horse
Chocolate Pegasus
The Candy Shop
Devil in a New Dress

RETAIL GOODS & SERVICES

Imagine Dragon Chinese Takeout
Federico Toreador's Pizza and Family Entertainment
Come Rain or Come Shine Carwash and Auto Detailing
Suit & Tie Dry Cleaning
Shape of You Massage Spa

NEW ACQUISITIONS & PROSPECTS

Ace of Spades Riverboat & Casino
Heartbreak Motel
The Lively Tombstone Tattoo Parlor
Jet Set Studio Records
Blood Machines Customs

Dark Horse and Chocolate Pegasus? Both had been cashflowing lower than their contemporaries. Could be a problem. Might need to rebrand to avoid overlap in market niche. He encased the two in a bright red circle of ink, and adorned it with a 'RB?'. And Devil in a New Dress hadn't done well after the Catholic parody shift (which he had advised against). *Men didn't want to think about God when getting their rocks off? Who would have guessed?* Another red circle. *Still, their costume designs were impressive. 'Relocation of back-of-house personnel, sans sexy nuns',* he underlined.

Another problem is simply that he had this deep of a dataset to begin with. A remarkably large portion of the portfolio fell under the 'adult entertainment industry' umbrella. This wouldn't be too much of a surprise to anyone familiar with Midnight City — but it was a classic example of one of the gang's biggest issues. *Concentration of assets.* When Castle had first been given the books, he noted only two substantial lines of income for the cartel: *hookers* and *blow*. It had come a long way from there, due almost exclusively to him and despite the best efforts of other members of leadership.

But Blackjack backed him. And that's all that mattered.

Blackjack saw little use for legitimate income, of course; if you asked him, he was at war. But there were *stakeholders*, as Castle had taken to calling them, who could lend measurable and substantial aid without holding the same radical views and taking the same radical risks. In particularly cynical moods, Castle might even count himself among them. Though, he often had to admit, Blackjack had his points.

Blackjack's points.

His brow furrowed in recall. He had almost forgotten about the...*what did he take to calling them? Mergers?* Double Helix was hardly pure-grassroots, so-to-speak. In much the same way the auto shop might expect a generous cash offer presented by a grim-faced gunman, there were peer-rivals with their own carrots and sticks. Some had come easily: 'Junior' Wayne of the Cash-Money Clique held faithful to their namesake, and the Blue Tang Band's 'Sizza' proved just as favorable to green bands. The Rings of Fire MC came around after President Will Knells had a sample of their superior amphetamines, and 'Dynomight' of the Tanbang Troup was remarkably agreeable after personally canvassing the VIP roster of 'Members Only'. The Hechizeros Family and Tripoloksi Syndicate remained as of yet unconvinced; if Castle properly understood the

limits of Blackjack's patience, they would be getting the stick soon. Though, for the man's bewildering machinations, never soon enough.

In truth, though it pained him to admit, Castle had attempted to trace Blackjack's motives and caught himself floundering. He had little in common with the man, or most of his contemporaries for that matter. Sure, he had a criminal record not much shorter than the man he had just spoken to. But surely it mattered that his was of a more 'white-collar' nature. And before that, you would find a decade-long finance career of suitably-successful-yet-unremarkable nature. If his job were to genuinely sympathize with those around him, he might have been the least competent amongst them.

Yet, he and Blackjack had found a sort of tentative respect: the kind that might evoke an image of ships in the night, or however that aphorism went — though, perhaps, with a sort of unexpected orthogonal reliance.

Mister Castle leaned back in his chair, sighed in dread, and grabbed a container from the hidden compartment of the appliance at his back. *1738 Accord Royal Cognac*. He began filling a glass — double-pour. If he was going to drown his fears with his labors, it could do with alcoholic accompaniment. It could soothe the pains now, if not the ones to come.

Blackjack had an open-secret of sorts: a veritable '*secret-weapon*' he only showed to those who wouldn't — or couldn't — tell what they had seen afterwards. Castle had his guesses, sure, but no certain answer; all he knew was that it came from the facility. Nearly everyone who had come from the facility had one. Hell, the man he had just spoken to was well-documented in *his* idiosyncrasy — and was certainly the simplest explanation for his apparently unquenchable thirst.

Clearly, these quirks had become quite a potent source of strength for the gang. Many operations hinged on the careful applications of these eccentric advantages, and many more would be to come. Proliferation was key, as was specialization. Rumors around the gang spoke of a new source of this specialization.

Castle had no use for rumors. He knew their origin. Another double was poured. He had little shame in admitting that he was afraid. He knew little, beyond a single assurance: the kind of consolation Blackjack was well-known for.

It was going to hurt.

